



Outstanding Afghan Pulwar

Hilt and scabbard Afghanistan, 18th/19th century

Blade Western India, 17th century

Watered steel, silver, gold, leather

90.5cm long (overall), 76cm long (the blade)

Stock no.: A5817

Provenance: Purchased in London, November 1991.

Australian private collection.

This fine *pulwar* from Afghanistan represents the highpoint of Indian, Persian, and traditional Afghan techniques. In the 18th and 19th centuries there were no hard borders between these nations, meaning that craftsmen were free to travel between regions, bringing their influences and techniques with them. Furthermore, British rule across the region brought European swords as well as encouraging movement of weapons between each country.¹

The steel hilt is of typical Afghan form, with downturned quillons terminating in lotus buds. At the centre of the crossguard is a quatrefoil. The fretted pommel of this pulwar is dome shaped, distinguished from

the Indian tulwar by its more bulbous shape. There are two types of pommel on such swords: spherical, which are found in combination with shamshir-type blades, or hemispherical, as in this case, which have a small, dome-shaped elevation on the flat side with a loop, through which a silk or leather cord can be threaded.² The curved hand guard, which is found on many swords from late 19th century Afghanistan, is of typical Afghan pierced steel openwork.³

The craftsmanship on this *pulwar* is, however, much finer than typical Afghan examples. The underside of the dome of the pommel is pierced with a pattern of split palmettes. Two *pulwars* in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (accession nos B.O.-[1945](#) and [B.O.-3762](#)), show a more standard pattern of perforations. The precision of these perforations is often used as a way to determine the skill of the craftsman.⁴ A 19th century *pulwar* with similar openwork on the hand guard but considerably cruder piercing around the hilt is pictured in Dmitriy Miloserdov's *Edged Weapons of Afghanistan: 19th – early 20th century*.⁵

Scrolling vegetal patterns are etched into the hilt and inlaid with gold. This technique, known as *koftgari*, is much more typical of India than Afghanistan. In small cartouches around the guard, invocations to Names of God and to the Prophet Muhammad are applied with *koftgari*:

يا سميع / يا بصير / يا غفار / يا قهار / يا الله / يا محمد

O All-Hearing! O All-Seeing! O Forgiver! O Subduer! O God! O Muhammad!

The hilt is fitted with an earlier Indian blade. Etched on both sides are pseudo-Latin letters and a personified sun, or *suraj-mukhi*. It is characteristic of blades made in the *firangi* or 'foreign' style in Western India in the 17th century, where Indian craftsmen copied the inscriptions from European blades, resulting in nonsensical combinations of letters. A broad *firangi* blade with near identical inscription and font across three fullers, and a sun design below, is in the Jodhpur Armoury (no. ARM/76/73).⁶ The blade is housed in a scabbard of leather over wood, with a long fluted chape, characteristic of the Afghan style.

This *pulwar* was published in *Islamic and Oriental Arms and Armour*, p. 193, cat. 466, as a late 18th or early 19th-century *pulwar*.⁷

[1] Miloserdov, Dmitriy. 'Sabres of Central Asia of the XIX – early XX centuries'. VIII МЕЖДУНАРОДНАЯ НАУЧНО-ПРАКТИЧЕСКАЯ КОНФЕРЕНЦИЯ МИР ОРУЖИЯ (2020), pp. 321-331; p. 326.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 327.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Miloserdov, Dmitriy. *Edged Weapons of Afghanistan: 19th – early 20th century*. Saint Petersburg: Atlant, 2019. p.156, cat. 26.

- [6] Elgood, Robert. *Rajput Arms and Armour: The Rathores and Their Armoury at Jodhpur Fort*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. New Delhi: Mehrangarh Museum Trust in association with Niyogi Books, 2017. p. 318.
- [7] Robert Hales. *Islamic and Oriental Arms and Armour*. London: Robert Hales/ C.I. Ltd., 2013. p. 193, cat. 466.